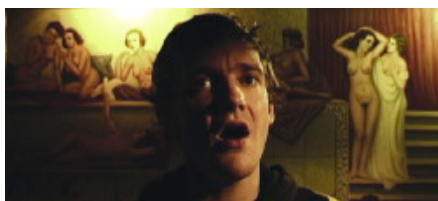


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Jesper Just

Midway Contemporary Art, St Paul,
Minnesota

Max Andrews

The title of Danish artist Jesper Just's exhibition 'A Fine Romance' is shared by a quaintly kinky duet, sung by, among others, Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. Ginger complains that Fred is as frigid as 'old mashed potato' - she wants a lover to 'wrestle' with, who doesn't mind his pants being messed up and who'll indulge her penchant for cacti. Though no direct reference is made to the song in Just's films, corresponding desires for more spontaneous, turbulent and franker passions resonate throughout each of them.

The three films are set in a basement 'Gentlemen's Club', a cavernous interior with spotlights that cut through smoke and reflect off the liquor bottles at the bar, its leather stools and glistening girlie posters. Each scenario features a boyish blond protagonist, played by actor Johannes Lilleøre. Playing a different character every time, his attire is inconsistent, as if he were a cipher for something, or someone, else - perhaps a surrogate Jesper Just or a delegate for masculinity. Each film has the quality of traumatic memory: the narrative is perfunctory and elemental, and ambiguous and potent emotions rule.

The six or so accompanying men in No Man is an Island II (all works 2004) look like ageing suburban mobsters or travelling salesmen, who dye their hair to cover the grey, scent the blood-red upholstery with their cologne and cloud the air with cigars. Their steam-pressed, mail-order suits look retarded, like the ones worn by the men in Richard Prince's cartoon paintings. Sitting on his own in a track top and T-shirt is Lilleøre. Unannounced, he stands and begins, in a voice at once powerful and vulnerable, to sing Roy Orbison's 'Crying'. With flawless timing the older men all rise and sing in a cappella harmony. The erotic frisson provided by the setting and their lush rapport with the young man make it a suffocatingly cryptic event. As the tears stream down Lilleøre's face it is impossible to tell if he's going through an initiation, or if he's these men's saviour.

A rather craggy-faced man, too old to be middle-aged but too young to be elderly, with wig-like, Nick Nolte hair is sitting at a banquette doing some after-hours paperwork, or possibly cooking the books. Lilleøre, now in a casual grey suit, is waiting for his presence to be felt. It's an immediately recognizable scenario, a *noir* mob-movie standard. Perhaps it's one of those at-the-back-of-the-bar meetings where curt words are exchanged before someone gets whacked. Just's camera indulges itself in the evolution of thoughts across each face, as the men with no name engage in a Sergio Leonean facial-expression stand-off. Surprise, disbelief and a half-smile play across the older man's brows and mouth: 'You shouldn't have come'; 'I'm leaving now anyway.'

The Sweetest Embrace of All is like an intro teaser for a TV forensic crime drama - laden with clues whose meaning has yet to be unravelled. Whether the ensuing death is an accident or premeditated we cannot tell; the younger man reveals his white-gloved hands, descends to his knees and clinches the older man's waist. A shaft of light hits his face as heartbeats and a song from a choirboy hit the sound-track in some kind of epiphany. Embrace segues into death grip as the two men roll on the floor, the younger in a peaceful grimace, the older gasping and whitening.

In these two films, as well as the accompanying role-reversal pole-dance of A Fine Romance, the club functions as a crucible of unspoken - or unspeakable - fantasies and motives. Even the upholstery and lighting are charged with latent voyeurism, enhancing the club's architecture of anticipation, staged intimacy and choreographed seduction. The vaguely threatening older men who populate it aren't there for the licensed ogling though, but for some more elusive covenant. Like Annika Larsson's Dog (2001), phlegmatic, just-so camerawork and sound-tracks combine with an unsettlingly tense ambience of paternal-fraternal ambiguity. As Fred and Ginger sing, 'True love should have the thrills that a healthy crime has.' Jesper Just's terse films revel in such a sweet-and-sour state of charged emotional transgression - where singing takes on the quality of a crime of passion, and an embrace seems like deliverance.

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